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ABSTRACT

This digest describes a research and development program being carried out in transitional bilingual education programs at five elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. Researchers have been collaborating with teachers and project advisors to develop, implement, and describe instructional strategies that improve the chances of students in these programs making a successful transition to mainstream English instruction. As part of the transition program, 12 specific language arts components that fall under three categories--literature studies, skill building, and other supporting components--have been identified for instruction. Across all phases of the program, in both Spanish and English language arts, students study literature. Discussions, writing projects, social studies content, and supplementary readings are all based on the literary selection being studied. The experience-text-relationship approach was adapted as the framework for the literature units. In this approach, the teacher helps students study the story in relation to their own experiences and to a central theme by means of ongoing discussions (instructional conversations), writing activities (literature logs and culminating writing projects), and reading. A study was conducted to establish the independent and combined effects of the use of literature logs and instructional conversations on transition and non-transition students' story comprehension and theme understanding. Results suggest that for English language learners, teachers should use both instructional conversations and literature logs, because the combined effect is stronger than the effect of using either component individually. For fluent English proficient students, both are not needed. Teachers could use one or the other, although instructional conversation would be the more efficient choice. (Contains 4 references.) (VWL)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Promoting Successful Transition to the Mainstream: Effective Instructional Strategies for Bilingual Students

This Digest describes a research and development program being carried out in transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs at five elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. The majority of the students in these schools are Latino, and more than 80% are classified as limited English proficient (LEP) at the time of enrollment. Since the early 1990s, researchers have been collaborating with teachers and project advisors to develop, implement, and describe instructional strategies that significantly improve the chances of these students to make a successful transition to mainstream English instruction. The transition program they have developed optimally spans Grades 3 through 5. Grade 3 is considered a pre-transition year, Grade 4 is Transition I, and Grade 5 is Transition II. The pre-transition component is designed to emphasize the importance of developing literacy skills in Spanish and oral language skills in English. The goal is to have all students performing at grade level in Spanish reading and writing and at the speech emergence level in oral English by the end of Grade 3, at which time they qualify for transition and begin English reading and writing while they continue receiving Spanish language arts.

It should be noted that the passage of California's Proposition 227 in 1998 essentially eliminated many bilingual programs throughout the state, including the ones with which the researchers have been working. Nevertheless, they are still investigating the effects of the transition program and its many components on the language arts achievement of English learners.

Language Arts Model

As part of the transition program, 12 specific language arts components have been identified that appear to be effective. The 12 components fall under three categories: literature studies, skill building, and other supporting components.

Literature Studies

Across all phases of the program, in both Spanish and English language arts, students study literature. Discussions, writing projects, social studies content, and supplementary readings are all based on the literary selection being studied. The experience-text-relationship approach was adapted as the framework for the literature units. In this approach, the teacher helps students study the story in relation to their own experiences and to a central theme by means of ongoing discussions (*instructional conversations*), writing activities (*literature logs* and *culminating writing projects*), and reading. The metaphor for this approach to studying literature is weaving (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). With assistance from the teacher, students weave together new and existing knowledge, experiences, and concepts. The media for weaving are writing and discussion. Discussions set up writing assignments, and writings inform subsequent discussions throughout the course of the literature unit.

Through the recurrent process of individual and social discourse (reading, writing, and discussing), the study of literature is believed to help students learn to comprehend text, make connections between the text and their own lives, and develop more fully formed concepts about the themes addressed in the units. In terms of English acquisition, the literature units provide substantial comprehensible language input—language that includes slightly more sophisticated structures or vocabulary than learners can produce on their own, but that is understandable within the context in which it is used. The literature unit becomes a meaningful social context in which words, phrases, language structures, and concepts are used, acquired, and learned.

Skill Building Components

Literature study needs to be complemented by additional skill-building components. Students need direct instruction in specific reading comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, summarizing, questioning), and they need daily opportunities to read texts geared to their reading level (*assigned independent reading*). Comprehension strategies are presented in 2-week modules in the first and fourth quarter of the year. The assigned independent reading center runs throughout the year. Ideally, the center includes materials related to the literature unit. As part of the weekly dictation program, students study a short but carefully targeted passage from the literature selection.

English language development through literature (ELD—developed by project consultant Dolores Beltrán) is a daily, 30- to 40-minute oral English program used in the pre-transition phase. Instruction is delivered to students in small, homogeneous groups based on their English proficiency level. Lessons and independent activities are drawn from a particular literature selection. The focus of lessons and the teachers' talk are geared specifically to students' production level. ELD through literature is an integral part of the pre-transition program.

Other Supporting Components

Teacher read-alouds and pleasure reading are both designed to expose students to good literature and to support their independent reading behaviors. At all grades, teachers read to students for approximately 20 minutes at least 3 times per week. Teacher read-alouds expose students to the language of expert writers and the fluency of an expert reader, engages them in material they may not yet be able to read on their own, and introduces them to new authors and genres. In addition, time each day is devoted to pleasure reading. Students choose their own books and stories, keep records of their reading, and for those books they find most interesting, complete short assignments (summaries, synopses, oral presentations, drawings, etc.). Many Transition 1 teachers use interactive journals during the first half of the year, when students are making their first attempts at English writing. The immediate written response from the teacher provides both emotional support for the students and a highly contextualized and comprehensible English text for them to read.

Studying Literature: Four Strategies That Work

Teachers in the transition programs have used a combination of instructional strategies to help students strengthen their English language skills and master the academic content of the literature units. Four strategies that have proved fundamental to the success of literature study with these students are discussed below.

Building students' background knowledge

Building students' background knowledge before and during the literature unit enables students to better comprehend the vocabulary, content, and themes of the story. For example, in a unit revolving around *Annie and the Old One* (Miles, 1971), a story about a Native American girl and her grandmother, students can learn more about Native American cultures prior to and during their reading of the story. Teachers can provide information about the geography of the areas where Native Americans live or about the Native American reverence for nature, for example, by reading a social studies text that explains the harmony among animals, humans, and the earth. Supplemental readings can be assigned and groups of students can make presentations to the class on different aspects of Native American cultures, such as food, clothing, religion, and art.

Drawing on students' personal experiences

By relating parts of the story to students' personal experiences, students can connect more directly with the story's content and themes. If students are encouraged to make connections between their personal lives and the characters in the story, they will be more motivated to continue reading. In the case of *Annie and the Old One*, students can

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write about their relationships with and feelings for their grandparents or about specific items left to them by older relatives.

Promoting extended discourse through writing and discussion

Throughout the unit, reading, writing, and discussion activities promote extended discourse and story comprehension. The instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1992/1993; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) is one component teachers can use with students to discuss the assigned background reading. Instructional conversations are dialogues between teacher and students in which the teacher listens carefully to grasp the students' communicative intent and tailors the dialogue to meet their emerging understanding. The discussions that arise in these instructional conversations provide students with ideas to write about in their literature logs or journals.

In preparing a unit, teachers develop specific log prompts for each chunk of the literary selection. Prompts might ask students to write about a personal experience related to the story, elaborate on something that has happened in the story, or interpret an aspect of the story or theme. Students complete a log entry at an independent center. Small group discussions typically begin with some or all students sharing their logs, and new prompts often emerge naturally from these small group discussions. For example, after a class discussion about Annie's grandmother's interpretation of death, students can write in their literature logs about loved ones who have passed away and how they are remembered. Sharing these experiences with the class will prompt further discussion, giving the students more language practice and helping generate ideas for future literature log topics.

Assisting students in re-reading critical portions of the text

For critical and challenging parts of the story, students may need reading assistance from the teacher. Teachers can guide students by breaking a specific passage down into several key events, making it easier to understand. Teachers can help students recount what has happened in the story up to a cognitively challenging point. Reenacting a challenging scene is also helpful. In this way, students imagine themselves as the characters in the story. There is a critical scene in *Annie and the Old One* where the grandmother explains to Annie that death is a natural part of life. Students can play the roles of Annie and her grandmother and take turns analyzing and explaining the meaning of each line of the dialogue.

A Research Study

The research project has been working to identify the effects of various individual program components and clusters of components to determine which produce the strongest and most reliable effects on students' learning. The first study was conducted to establish the independent and combined effects of two of the literature studies components discussed earlier—literature logs and instructional conversations—on transition and non-transition students' story comprehension and theme understanding.

In the experiment, students read *Louella's Song* (Greenfield, 1993), a short story about a 10-year-old girl who pretends to have laryngitis to avoid singing a solo in a class performance. Louella changes her mind when she realizes how much the audience—patients at a children's hospital—will appreciate her singing. The students in the study could identify with Louella, a girl their age who was nervous about performing in public. The theme of the story, giving of oneself, presented many ideas for literature log activities and instructional conversations.

The first phase of the study involved pretesting and whole-class preparatory activities. Students wrote essays on what they knew or thought about giving. A few days later, teachers introduced *Louella's Song* to the students, reading the first page aloud. The students then read the rest of the story on their own. They were tested on the details of the story and were asked to answer five questions that called for text-based interpretations of story events. They were also asked to explain the concept of giving ("What does it mean to be a giving person?") and to provide an example of giving ("Describe a time when someone was very giving toward you.").

The students were divided into two groups, one with 64 limited English proficient (LEP) students and one with 52 fluent-English-proficient (FEP) students. Within each group, students were further divided into four subgroups: (a) those who only read and studied the story (control group), (b) those who used only literature logs, (c) those who used only instructional conversations, and (d) those who used literature logs and instructional conversations.

Teachers asked the students who were assigned to groups with literature logs to write about personal experiences like Louella's, either a time when they were supposed to do something in front of a group of people or a time when others were giving toward them. Students also read aloud from their literature logs to their classmates. In the instructional conversation lessons, teachers clarified the events of the story through discussion and helped students understand the concept of giving. All students, however, read and studied the story independently and completed worksheets summarizing it.

At the end of the unit, students were tested again on their factual and interpretive comprehension of the story using the same measures that were used in the pretest. The researchers found that when teachers used both literature logs and instructional conversations with the LEP fourth and fifth graders, the students understood the story better than when teachers used only one of the techniques. For the FEP students, however, the combined effects of literature logs and instructional conversations were not significantly greater than the effect of a single approach. In addition, the effects of instructional conversations alone were somewhat more significant than the effects of literature logs alone for both LEP and FEP students.

These results suggest that for English language learners, teachers should use both instructional conversations and literature logs, because the combined effect is stronger than the effect of using either component individually. For fluent English proficient students, specifically for theme understanding, both are not needed. Teachers could use one or the other, although instructional conversation would be the more efficient choice given its apparent comprehension effects.

Conclusion

Teachers see transition instruction as requiring a wide range of components, from skill building to the study of literature. However, they often lack information on the most effective strategies for working with transition students or clear evidence that points to the effects of various components on student learning. The project discussed here offers teachers insight into instructional activities that have a measurable and meaningful impact on student achievement. Compared to the typical transition program in the same district, this transition program has produced significantly higher levels of Spanish literacy achievement at Grades 3 and 4 and English literacy achievement at Grade 5, as measured by standardized performance-based assessments. Evaluation studies of the benefit of such literacy instruction suggest that the program has provided students with a demonstrably successful transition experience.

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This Digest is drawn from two reports published by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence: *The Effects of Instructional Conversations and Literature Logs on the Story Comprehension and Thematic Understanding of English Proficient and Limited English Proficient Students* (Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999); and *Successful Transition into Mainstream English: Effective Strategies for Studying Literature* (Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon, & McLean, 1999).

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